

Blackfoot Challenge honored

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We've known for a long time that the Blackfoot Challenge is one of the coolest conservation efforts in the country. Now even the bigwigs at Harvard University are lining up to agree.

The Ash Institute for Democratic Government and Innovation at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government has given the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service its "Innovations in American Government" Award for the program to protect the Blackfoot River watershed.

The Blackfoot Challenge is a cooperative effort between federal and state government employees, ranchers, environmental groups and industry to preserve the river valley's rural character. The key word is cooperation. "This is an unusual and vital accomplishment and a model for other communities in the American West," said Patricia McGinnis, president and CEO of the Council for Excellence in Government, which co-administered the award.

Since its inception, the Blackfoot Challenge has protected more than 140,000 acres of private land, restored 38 miles of streams, 2,600 acres of wetlands, 2,300 acres of native grasslands, reduced conflict between people and grizzly bears by 50 percent, and increased the fish population by more than 500 percent.

At a time when Montanans have become accustomed to heated rhetoric and drawn-out legal battles over seemingly any activity in the wild spaces between the state's rapidly growing cities, it's good to remember that there really is another way.